

Vets for Freedom

Vets for Freedom (VFF), which as recently as September 2007 declared itself the "leading voice representing troops and veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan."^[1], on July 10, 2007, resumed its pro-Bush administration, pro-war in Iraq political activities by launching its Win the War! Victory in Iraq" campaign, stating that the "next ten weeks will be absolutely crucial in determining the fate of the Iraq War."^[2] ^[3]^[4]

Since, in his September 13, 2007, address to the nation, President George W. Bush appears to have dropped "victory" from his goals for Iraq, and has substituted "success" in its place,^[5] will Vets for Freedom now rename its pro-victory in Iraq campaign "Win the War! Success in Iraq"?

VFF communicates its slogan in military terms: "Mobilizing veterans to communicate America's strategic objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan."^[6]

In July 2006, VFF—calling itself the Vets for Freedom Action Fund (VFF-AF)—registered^[7] with the IRS as a 527 committee national lobby. It was, in essence, a Republican front group managed by Republican-affiliated public relations^[8], media^[9], legal^[10], and political consultants, including former White House spokesman Taylor Gross, to defeat candidates who advocate an end to the US occupation of Iraq.

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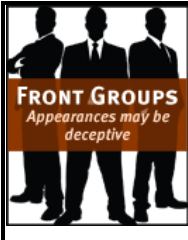
In March 2008, VFF arranged "a low-key classroom discussion about patriotism and service to country" at Lake Forest High School in Minnesota. Then, VFF "decided to call a press conference at the school and alerted media." In response, "anti-war activists, including veterans of Iraq who oppose the war" decided to organize "their own press conference and rally."^[11]

The high school canceled the event. Right-wing radio and television began criticizing Principal Steve Massey, and angry conservatives called and emailed him, "calling him a coward, a Communist or a spineless America Hater." Local columnist Nick Coleman suggested, "Maybe a Minnesota school was just trying to keep its students from becoming pawns in a political game. There would not have been much outrage" if, instead of being billed as the "Vets for Freedom National Heroes Tour," the event had been called the "Republican Tour to Shore Up the Pro-War Vote," he added.^[11]

Non-partisan, bi-partisan or neocon lobbyists?

Funded by Republican Jewish Coalition / Freedom's Watch

"Working behind the scenes through most of the summer" 2007, Freedom's Watch president Bradley A. Blakeman "assembled big-dollar donors and quietly helped pro-war groups ranging from the American Legion to Rolling Thunder make a case for Bush's war strategy. Freedom's Watch also formed partnerships with other groups backing the war, such as Families United, **Vets for Freedom** and the Veterans of Foreign Wars," Jim Kuhnhehn reported September 28, 2007, for the Associated Press.^[12]



This article is part of the Center for Media & Democracy's spotlight on front groups and corporate spin.

This article is part of the Watch coverage of Vets for Freedom (VFF) and Freedom Action Fund (VFF-AF).

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VFF staff and members have extensive ties to George W. Bush, Bill Kristol and Republican Party

- **VFF Executive Director wrote article in pro-War *Weekly Standard*:**
 - Pete Hegseth, VFF's Executive Director since May 2007, wrote the article "What Would Lincoln Do? Civil War Woes Emblematic Of Those Faced In Iraq," published June 26, 2007, in neo-conservative William Kristol's *The Weekly Standard* magazine. Hegseth addressed statements made by Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) in a June 21, 2007, *Washington Post* op-ed^[13] which "bothered" Hegseth, "all of which run counter to realities on the ground in Iraq," Hegseth wrote.^[14]
 - Note: William (Bill) Kristol is an original co-founder of the Project for the New American Century, as well as a member of and an advisor to the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, with which Vets for Freedom has become associated.^[15]
- **VFF National Field Director has worked for other pro-War groups and works for McCain's presidential campaign:**
 - An Iraq veteran, VFF National Field Director Joel A. Arends is a U.S. Army Reserve Captain^[16] who served 2003-2005 as Platoon Leader and Company Commander for the 1st Cavalry Division.^{[17][18]} He is a member of^[19] and previously worked with Families United for Our Troops and Their Mission, another pro-war in Iraq organization.^[20] In 2000, Arends ran unsuccessfully for the Iowa Statehouse "while living in Sioux City".^[19] He is listed in May 2007 as a paid staffer for Republican 2008 presidential hopeful John McCain^[21] and, when appearing at an August 8, 2007, O'Brien County Republican Summer Gala in Paullina, Iowa, Arends was described as "now a surrogate for Senator McCain's campaign".^[22] Also in August 2007, Arends was identified as the replacement for Craig Dewey as Americans for Prosperity's South Dakota Assistant State Director.^[23]
- **VFF member wrote article in pro-War *National Review* and is a "course assistant" for William Kristol at Harvard:**
 - VFF member Alex Gallo, a West Point graduate who served in 2004 as an infantry officer in Samarra, Iraq, wrote a pro-war in Iraq article^[24] that was published July 18, 2007, by *National Review Online*.
 - Gallo is currently a "masters in public-policy candidate" at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government,^[24] where he is "course assistant" for Kristol's "Can America be Governed?"^[25] Kristol, whom David Corn calls^[26] "the No. 1 cheerleader for the Iraq war," in 2006 assisted VFF-AF in its pro-war in Iraq campaign support of Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.).
- **VFF member organized against Democratic congressional candidate in 2006, is challenging Republican congressman in 2008 primary, published essay in pro-War, Kristol-owned *Weekly Standard*:**
 - Eric Eglund, another VFF member who is a Major in the U.S. Air Force Reserve who served on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan^[27], announced July 31, 2007, that he will challenge Rep. John Doolittle (R-Calif.) in the 2008 Republican primary.^[28]
 - Eglund helped Doolittle "defeat Democratic challenger Charlie Brown"^[29] in the 2006 congressional elections. In the fall of 2006, he "organized a group of veterans to oppose Doolittle's Democratic challenger, Brown, a retired Air Force officer who is seriously weighing another run next year."^[28]
 - Eglund is the author of the March 2007 self-published *The Troops Need You, America: Six Ways to Help Them Win*,^[30] a book "based on an essay he published" in Kristol's *Weekly Standard*.^[31] The book "shows average Americans how to help the troops win in Iraq."^[32]
- **VFF State chapter leader was recruited by GOP to challenge Democratic congressman in 2006 elections; was profiled in *Weekly Standard*:**
 - Vince Micco, VFF's New Jersey chapter leader, was recruited by the GOP in March 2006 to challenge five-term Democratic Rep. Steve Rothman in the 2006 congressional election.^[33] Micco was profiled in an October 23, 2006, article in Kristol's *Weekly Standard*, in which he was described as "unabashedly pro-Bush and hawkish in his political outlook."^[34]
- **VFF media contact is former Bush administration PR flak for Iraq War, interned with the Republican National Committee, worked on Bush 2004 campaign, tried to get Nader on 2004 ballot in AR:**
 - The contact person for VFF's press releases is Adriel Domenech,^[35] VFF's "Field Director"^[36], who most recently "worked for 13 months"^[37] as a member of the U.S. Department of State Public Affairs Iraq GO (Global Outreach) Team.^{[38][39]}
 - In Fall 2001, Domenech, a graduate of Texas A&M who interned with the Republican National Committee, had completed the Colorado campaign and was a "72-Hour Director in Arkansas"^[40] for Bush-Cheney '04 Inc..^[41]
 - In August 2004, Domenech's name was found amongst recognized "Republican signatures on petitions to get third-party candidate Ralph Nader on the presidential ballot in Arkansas." At the time, a "news release from the Democratic Party of Arkansas said at least two dozen state Republicans, including Lt. Gov. Win Rockefeller's chief of staff, had signed the petitions to get Nader included on the state ballot. ... Conventional political wisdom [was] that Nader [would] take votes from the Democratic nominee."^[42]
- **VFF co-founder was assisted by former Bush White House spokesman's PR firm in attempt to get dispatches published in mainstream newspapers, got credentials from the *Weekly Standard*, was assisted by Kristol:**
 - In 2006, former White House spokesman Taylor Gross's public relations firm the Herald Group helped VFF co-founder Wade Zirkle and "fellow Iraq veteran David Bellavia approach mainstream newspapers to offer dispatches from the two as war correspondents embedded with the military. (https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Vets_for_Freedom#Embedded:_Connecting_the_Dots) The two eventually got press credentials^[43] through *The Weekly Standard*, whose editor, William Kristol, became an informal adviser to the group and helped put it in touch with" Republican strategist Dan Senor, who was "on retainer to help with fundraising."^[44]

See the Vets for Freedom Action Fund article for more details on VFF's Republican connections.

Freedom's Watch: the cavalry has arrived

"For the past few months, Vets for Freedom has been on the front lines of the Iraq war debate in America, with only a few allies. But this morning, in a very real sense, the cavalry appeared on the horizon in the form of a new organization called Freedom's Watch," Pete Hegseth, VFF Executive Director, wrote in an August 22, 2007, viral email posted by Free Republic.^[45]

"Freedom's Watch has launched a multi-state advertising campaign featuring powerful stories from veterans and families that every household in America should hear.

It's time that the rest of America heard the words of soldiers who have served (and been wounded) in Iraq and the stories of families who have lost loved ones there," Hegseth wrote.

VFFers respond to bleak, soldier-authored NYT op-ed in the *The Weekly Standard*

The VFF "seven", all veterans of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, responded in William Kristol's conservative *Weekly Standard* on August 24, 2007,^[46] to an August 19, 2007, *New York Times* op-ed ^[47] by what is being called the NYT "seven": all "infantrymen and noncommissioned officers with the 82nd Airborne Division soon heading back home" from 15 months duty in Iraq. They wrote a less-than-glowing assessment of the conditions on the ground in Iraq.

The *New York Times* "seven" were Buddhika Jayamaha, Wesley D. Smith, Jeremy Roebuck, Omar Mora, Edward Sandmeier, Yance T. Gray, and Jeremy A. Murphy. (Note: On September 10, 2007, Yance Gray and Omar Mora were among seven American troops killed near Baghdad in vehicle rollover accident.)^{[48][49][50]}

The VFF "seven" were David Bellavia,^[51] Pete Hegseth,^[52] Michael A. Baumann,^[53] Carl Hartmann,^[54] David Thul,^[55] Knox Nunnally, ^[56] and Joe Dan Worley^[57]

The VFF "seven's" Op-Ed noted that none of the authors had served in Iraq during the "surge," unlike the *New York Times* seven:

"Of the almost 3,000 soldiers from the Army's storied 82nd Airborne Division currently serving in the hottest of Iraqi neighborhoods, seven felt confident enough in their misgivings to sign an opinion piece. They should not be surprised that many of their comrades—including the seven undersigned here—find their work to be misguided, ... The portrait these soldiers painted, while surely accurate and honest, is more representative of pre-surge Baghdad: sectarian strife, lawlessness, and indiscriminate slaughter" the VFF "seven" wrote.^[46]

"We understand the frustration our fellow soldiers feel. All of us were in Iraq before the 'surge' and lament never seeing a coherent, security-based counterinsurgency strategy. In truth, we were only clearing—not holding. ... But we also know what's possible when even small portions of counterinsurgency strategy are applied. Insurgents are exposed, leaders stand up, and stability occurs. ... It's unfortunate that soldiers in the 82nd Airborne have not yet benefited from the new strategy, but it will ensure that their actions, and those of their fallen brethren, will not have been in vain," the VFF "seven" wrote.^[46]

Note: VFF's *Weekly Standard* op-ed was also published online by the Assyrian International News Agency. The names of the authors are stated, as is the fact that they are all members of VFF; however, the op-ed itself lacks a title. The source for the article cited at the bottom of the page is News Corporation. Additionally, following the names is the following: "This Op-Ed was originally submitted to the New York Times, which declined to publish it."^{[58][59]}

Catapulting the propaganda

VFF's Missouri chairman, Brandon Mueller, has reportedly called on Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill "to return \$16,000 she received from Moveon.org during her election campaign in 2006," according to the September 13, 2007, *The Source* Blog.^[60] McCaskill was also asked to "denounce" the MoveOn.org ad "General Petraeus or General Betray Us?" published in the *New York Times* September 10, 2007, the first day of testimony on the progress of the surge and war in Iraq by Lt.Gen. David Petraeus before Congress,^{[61][62]} calling the ad "a disgrace". Mueller "went on to say she [McCaskill] should 'take the lead on this issue and return the money that she has taken from the organization that has libeled an American patriot who has served his country selflessly for many years.'"

It should be noted that, on September 9, 2007, the day before MoveOn.org's controversial ad was published, it was VFF's executive director Pete Hegseth who accused MoveOn.org in the article "MoveOn.org Calls Petraeus a Traitor" published in the right-wing publication *The Weekly Standard* of calling Lt.Gen. Petraeus a "traitor".^[63]

As Jeffrey Feldman wrote September 11, 2007, in *The Daily Kos*^[64]

"The only problem: the word 'traitor' appears nowhere in the MoveOn.org ad nor anywhere on the MoveOn.org page about the ad. It is Hegseth's article that introduced the word 'traitor' into the story—an outright lie intended to silence dissent against the war. Less than 24 hours after the Hegseth piece ran and the MoveOn.org ad appeared, the mainstream media picked up the Weekly Standard's lie and repeated it until it became the story."

The phrase "catapulting the propaganda" comes from a comment made on May 24, 2005, by President George W. Bush: "See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda."^[65]

Ad campaign supporting pro-war candidates ... again

Rose Garden photo-op props with President Bush

On July 20, 2007, President George W. Bush, who "has relied on veterans for support and credibility" since the war in Iraq began, met for an hour in the Oval Office^[66] "with members of four organizations that formed since the war began to represent Iraq veterans and military families." The group formed the "backdrop"^[67] for a Rose Garden speech in which Bush asked Congress to let his 'surge' strategy work and for passage of a defense-spending bill that stalled last week when Senate Republicans blocked an amendment calling for withdrawal," Cory Reiss wrote July 23, 2007, in Lakeland, Florida's *The Ledger*.^[68]

While urging Congress to pass the defense spending bill before its August recess, Bush "repeated the words said to him" by VFF's Eric Egland—"We live in the world's oldest democracy and have been blessed with the strength to protect our freedoms and to help others who seek the same," Donna Miles reported for the American Forces Press Service.^[69]

Bush met not only with VFF's Egland, who is also the founder of Troops Need You, but also with members of Families United for Our Troops and Their Mission and Military Families Voice of Victory, Miles wrote.

Meeting with Bush on behalf of VFF were executive director Pete Hegseth, "retired Marine Capt. Knox Nunnally, retired Army Sgt. Mark Seavey, and retired Marine Lt. Wade Zirkle," Miles wrote.

"Win the War! Victory in Iraq" campaign

Vets for Freedom redux

On May 18, 2007, Vets for Freedom reverted to using its original name.^[70] Established in January 2006 as a non-profit organization, on July 25, 2006, its founders registered it as the Vets for Freedom Action Fund (VFF-AF)^[71], a Section 527 political action committee which functioned as a Republican lobbying front group to promote the re-election of Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.).

"The Freedom Update"

VFF added a new section on its website called "The Freedom Update", which is described as "Your daily source for the best Iraq war news and opinion."^[72]

Another mission change

VFF, self-described as a "nonpartisan organization" established by Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, now states that its mission is "to educate the American public about the importance of achieving success in these conflicts by applying our first-hand [knowledge] to issues of American strategy and tactics—namely "the surge" in Iraq" and that it "support[s] policymakers from both sides of the aisle who have stood behind our great generation of American warriors on the battlefield, and who have put long-term national security before short-term partisan political gain."^[73]

VFF states on its new donation page^[74] that it "needs your help to communicate America's strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan" and, "Without your support, the war debate will be dominated by defeatists like Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi, along with powerful anti-war groups. We cannot allow this to happen. Too much is at stake," VFF states. "Please donate today to make your voice heard. Your money will help us fight radical fringe groups who want to steer our country towards defeat in the name of gutter-ball partisan politics."

For background, see the article on VFF's previous mission changes.

Leadership

Funding

A disclaimer on the bottom of each VFF web page states^[75] "Vets for Freedom is a nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization. Contributions are not deductible for federal income tax purposes."

Originally, the organization's precise tax status (501c3, 501c4, 527 committee) was not stated and virtually no information was available on the Vets for Freedom website about the funders and organizations behind Vets for Freedom, making it difficult to evaluate the degree to which the organization might have been part of a war propaganda campaign interacting with the Bush Administration, the Pentagon, the American Legion and/or other ideologically-driven public relations and lobbying efforts that have exploited for political purposes the issues of US war veterans and their families, such as Move America Forward and the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

On February 19, 2007, the VFF-AF donated \$4,227 to Vets for Freedom. The expenditure was identified as a "Contribution to non-profit organization."^[76]

For more VFF-AF financial information, see "VFF-AF Funding."^[77]

Also see the VFF-AF article for information on VFF's and VFF-AF's donation endeavors, as well as the article on the Donatelli Group & the Swift Boat connection.

Headquarters

Although the mailing address for VFF is a post office box in Woodstock, VA,^[78] in 2006 Julie Kosterlitz wrote^[79] in the *National Journal* that Zirkle ran the 527 group Veterans for Freedom "out of a basement sublet in Washington, D.C."

Contact information

Fundraising / mailing address

Vets for Freedom - Donations^[80]^[81]
P.O. Box 314
132 North Main Street
Woodstock, VA 22664

FEC/IRS filing address

12097 South Middle Road
Edinburg, VA
E-mail: [pete AT vetsforfreedom.org](mailto:pete@vetsforfreedom.org)^[82]
E-mail for Owen West: **owen.west AT gs.com**

URL: <http://www.vetsforfreedom.org/> and <http://www.veteransforfreedom.org> (redirect)

Note: The 132 North Main Street (http://www.pbase.com/woodstock_ec/image/9006180), Woodstock, VA, address (<https://www.prwatch.org/node/4916#comment-1007>) is the same as that given for Denman Zirkle, contact for Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp 1657 (Turner Ashby) ^[1] (http://www.southernmessenger.org/scv_camps.htm), named after Confederate General Turner Ashby.



Pete Hegseth, executive director of Vets for Freedom, left, and others, look on as President Bush, center, speaks in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington on July 20, 2007. White House photo by Joyce N. Boghosian.

On May 8, 2006, Vets for Freedom established its blogsite "Vets for Freedom's Troop Blog" at <http://www.vetsforfreedom.org/blog/>, with the first entry by then Executive Director Wade Zirkle.

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